

Closing NORA Partner Comments -- Labor

**Eric Frumin, MA, Director of Occupational Safety and Health
Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees, AFL-CIO
Chair, Labor Research Advisory Committee on OSH Statistics to the US Bureau of Labor
Statistics**

Thanks to the Workshop Organizing Committee (especially Wayne Lednar), to Janie Gittleman and John Myers for assisting with the Labor Session, to John Sestito and Janet Ehlers for their overall planning effort, and to all the NIOSH Core Surveillance Team. Your work on surveillance is in the finest traditions of public health practice.

We all share a common interest in worker injuries and illnesses. So do others, but many of them fail or refuse to learn the lessons from these incidents. We all share a commitment to study the lessons of that experience, sometimes “by any means necessary.”

One essential technique to doing such studies is in the spirit of NORA: partnership. For the unions and employers, cooperation is often difficult. The labor-management climate in the United States now is very bad, and getting worse. Witness the Congress’ decision this week to deny collective bargaining rights to public safety workers like cops and firefighters, in gross violation of ILO conventions.

Cooperation is also difficult because of the fight on public regulatory policy, which is also getting worse in the WTO environment. For instance, the national debate on ergonomics was poisoned by some sinister actors who do not represent the mainstream of employer opinion or practice. The NAM and Gibson, Dunn and Crutcher have terrorized employers on the question of the potential cost of ergonomics programs. Similar reactionary forces are trying to destroy the ACGIH.

Nonetheless, we have to rise above these conflicts and find opportunities to strongly, effectively, quickly and visibly move forward the NORA surveillance agenda. This underlies my focus today on the BLS Annual Survey.

As I said in my keynote on Wednesday, two such opportunities are “marginal” improvements in the Survey. They are marginal not because the expected outcomes are only marginally better, but because they represent only minor changes in the actual mechanics of the Survey itself. They are:

1. the capture of Restricted Activity cases in the detailed case data collection effort, which is essential because of the fast relative growth of restricted activity cases in comparison to “days away from work” cases. According to BLS, this is solely a matter of funding.
2. the renewed development of a followback capability within the Survey.

The latter change has already been specifically endorsed today by the Labor and Public Health session participants, and for good reason. I refer you to the example of the Lockout standard

discussed in my presentation to the Labor Session for the details about the importance of followback studies in the development of OSHA standards on traumatic injury prevention.

We also heard examples of successful collaborations on followback studies at the state level from the Risk Management session. Can we rely on the insurance industry to do this nationally? Perhaps, but we can wait for private-sector data alone to fill the gap in data collection and analysis, gaps felt by workers and employers at both large and small enterprises.

From the trade union standpoint, we won't wait. The Annual Survey estimates that 140,000 truck drivers are disabled annually. In addition, there is huge potential in a truck driver study to learn about the effects of extend work hours. With 15,000 raw truck driver cases collected annually, we are assured of revealing significant findings.

Falls are also a serious problem, and not just in construction, and would be a suitable subject of followback studies.

There is key business support for this approach. In 1999, the Business Research Advisory Committee (BRAC) endorsed the followback study approach within the Annual Survey.

I propose that this change in the BLS Annual Survey be adopted as a recommendation from this workshop.

What kind of follow-up action is necessary to secure the adoption of this change? We believe that responsible employer groups, such as ORC and the companies represented here, also support this initiative and ask them to do so actively. Labor also needs to get busy" in supporting it. I will be asking the AFL-CIO, including the Teamsters and the IBEW, to step up their support.

At the state level, active support is absolutely crucial. We need strong endorsements from all the state agencies involved: the public health agencies in the NIOSH network, the agencies who administer the BLS survey program, and the OSHA state plan agencies. Your explicit statement that these national data are important to your state is sometimes much more convincing than broad requests from national or federal organizations. As Tish Davis pointed out, the numbers from her state (MA) were simply not big enough to reveal the answers she is seeking. We urgently need all states interested in this expansion of the Survey to indicate their willingness to contribute to a "core" set of national data at the BLS, developed with the assistance of NIOSH's analytic capabilities.

With the right combination of support and cooperation, we can see a followback study program operational within two years.

Are there barriers to these and other progressive surveillance efforts? Sure, real surveillance efforts are usually hard for all of us. Within our own organizations, we confront the leaders who are distracted by other pressing issues, and missions that focus on entirely different priorities. For UNITE, the organizing mission is our first, second and third priority. And we are succeeding, but we don't have much time for other activities.

We also face adversaries. Trade unions operate in an especially hostile environment. The “neanderthals” are out there, in force it seems.

But our struggle to launch and operate effective surveillance systems is worth it. We have made great progress, and we should brag about it in constructive ways that benefit the organization (this means that we have to measure the benefits carefully!). We should also describe our gains in ways that promote new surveillance efforts, because we always have to be on guard against the newly-emerging forms of disease and injury.

This Workshop has certainly helped us to do these things, and I thank you again for your participation and contribution.